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“DIVINE HUNGER”:
NOT TRANSCENDING TRAUMA
IN SLAVENKA DRAKULIĆ’S
THE TASTE OF A MAN

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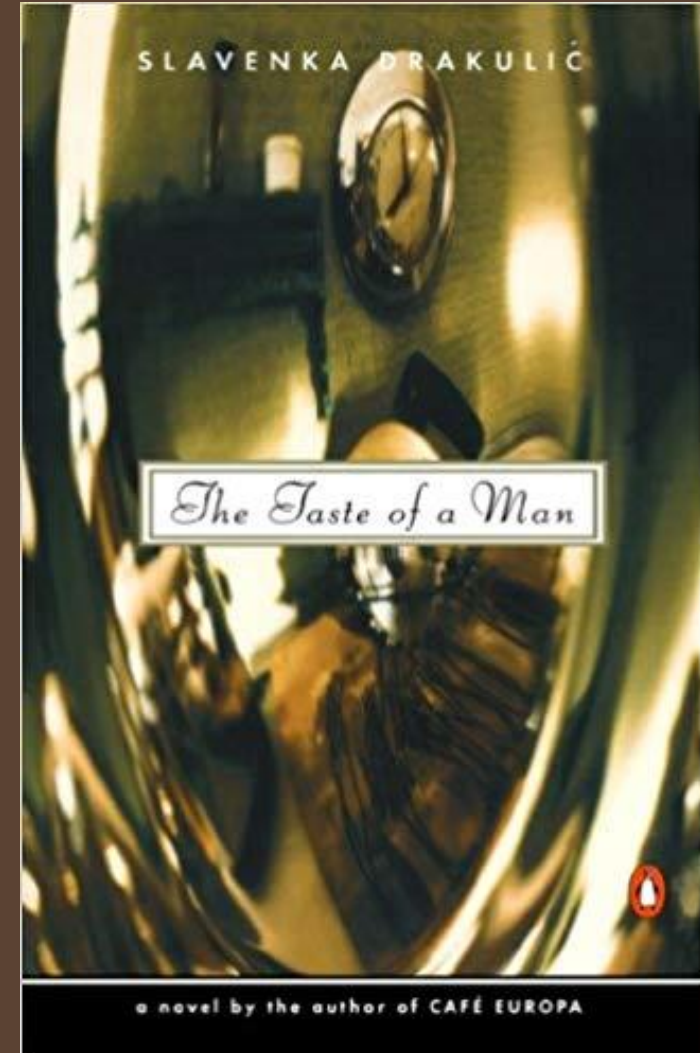
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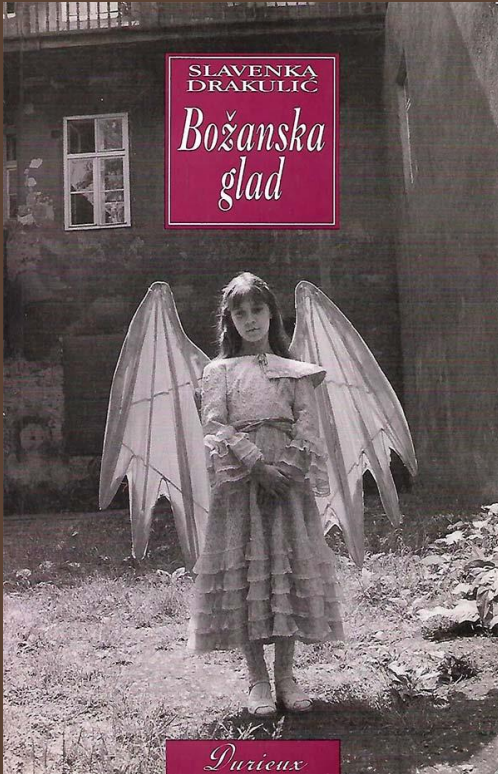


Thanks

- 1997 Central European University course on performance of gender identity in the context of war
- UHON 390 “Love Stinks!”
- Thanks to my “Love Stinks!” students



Božanska glad/The Taste of a Man (1995)



- Tereza, a Polish graduate student in English and a poet, and José, a Brazilian anthropologist, have a brief, passionate love affair while both are on research fellowships in New York City.
- José is researching cannibalism and the Catholic Church.
- Eating and sex are Tereza and José's primary occupations during their three months together.
- Four days before returning to Poland, Tereza kills, dismembers, and eats José.

Božanska glad/The Taste of a Man (1995)

- The first-person narration begins with Tereza cleaning her Greenwich Village apartment.
- Gradually the reader realizes she has killed and eaten her lover.
- The narration continually circles back through Tereza's earlier life, the relationship, murder, dismemberment, eating, and disposal of the corpse as she cleans.
- The story ends with her disposing of José's decomposing head at Kennedy Airport as she heads back to Poland.
- To whom does she tell the story? Why?

Tereza's story: Her “inward glance”

“Increasingly, I reverted to the past. It was like being attacked by it. Forgotten images would suddenly flash through my mind, inundating me with memories, like lava, as if every step in executing the plan was connected to some scene from my childhood or suppressed emotion.”

Tereza engages with José's experiences and research in meaning making.

- He has endured **sexual trauma**.
- He has been raised to use women **sexually and for food**.
- His research engages **cannibalism and Catholic sacramentalism**.

Tereza's traumatic past intrudes on the narrative.

- Tereza is taught to “**pray and play the piano**” to please her parents.
- Her mother dominates the family via **Catholicism, food, cleanliness, and order** until her death of cancer.
- She experiences the first episode of **serial sexual abuse, contextualized by eating**, at age 6 while on a family vacation.
- Her father brings **predatory male students** into her home.
- She endures **physical and sexual abuse from male friends/lovers** during adolescence and adulthood.
- She becomes fascinated with **cultural practices** like pig slaughters in rural Poland, where she learns about **butchery and blood**.
- She associates **eating, sex, and death**.

Place-based trauma theory and memory

Within place-based trauma theory...

- “Trauma occurs in specific bodies, time periods, cultures, and places, each informing the meaning and representation of traumatic experience.”
- Place represents a cultural context that “organizes both the memory and meaning of trauma” and determines both what can/cannot be expressed and the narrative forms of expression.
- Trauma is understood by the victim as due to the betrayal/undermining of social relationships.
- Different types of trauma produce different responses (disruption of memory, self, and relationships), depending on the “social valuation” of the traumatic experience by the culture in which the trauma occurs.
- Both remembering and forgetting are social acts. Trauma victims’ “landscape of memory” can involve both extremely clear and accurate memories and “strategic forgetting.”
- Social conditions govern recollection and retelling. Recollection is based on the past context in which the story is historically rooted and the current context in which the story is retold.

(Balaev, “Trauma Studies”; Kirmayer, “Landscapes of Memory”)

Tereza's story: Silence

Sexual and physical abuse by various men since the age of 6

Places represent cultural values that organize memory and meaning.

- Dubrovnik: “I’m going to eat you all up, eat you all up...”
- Warsaw: “I was relegated to [their] clumsy, aggressive paws... to their selfish lips, their miserable ignorance which slowly, almost imperceptibly, made me lose touch with my own body.”

Betrayal by trust figures undermine her understanding of social relationships.

- Tereza – taught to “pray and play piano” to please her parents
- Mother (“pray”) – demands order but can’t keep Tereza safe
- Father (“piano”) – brings predatory male students into her home
- Other caretakers – either predators or enablers of abuse

Tereza's story: Silence



Culturally enforced silence ensures that her stories remain untold.

- “Unspeakability” of trauma is determined by cultural values and ideologies
- Culture of silence
 - Silence and gender – Who will listen to Tereza’s stories?
 - Silence and the family – What doesn’t get talked about inside/outside the home?

Tereza's story: Silence/Dissociation

Tereza uses the “inrush of memory” to understand her past and justify her actions.

- She recalls/restructures her memories and what she learns of José's history into a “coherent story.”
- She understands all of her and José's past experiences as leading them to cannibalism.



Healing through José?



Tereza thinks she has been cured by José.

- “I knew it from the sudden, unexpected, sharp awareness of the body: I was returning to the body, to desire, to myself” (28).
- “José had taught me finally to like my body, and his death would not change that. From now on I would love my body, and him inside, even more” (204-205).

Has she healed?

Tereza sees herself and José as fused into a single entity by their emotions, activities, and “dangerous exclusiveness.”

She feels whole (TerJosé or Joséter?).

She feels autonomous, but may she sacrifice José in order to subsume him?

Has she transcended trauma, or is she (and now José) still a victim?

Or a traumatized perpetrator?

“He would look at me strangely sometimes, especially when he thought I was preoccupied and did not notice. It was a look I did not know, it came from the corners of his eyes, under half-closed lids, a stalking look which gave me an uneasy feeling, a look in which I was not alive anymore.”

“I noticed that José was worried about me. Though I was perfectly healthy, he began asking me how I felt and if I was all right – questions he had never asked me before.”

Narrative and recovery

Memory and forgetting are social.

- “It is easy to forget when there is a tacit agreement not to remember...”
- “There is a crucial distinction between the social space in which the trauma occurred and the contemporary space in which it is (or is not) recalled...[V]ictims of abuse inhabit a private space of shame...*If a family or a community agrees that a trauma did not happen, then it vanishes from collective memory and the possibility for individual memory is severely strained*” (Kirmayer).

Recall is creative meaning making.

- “[T]raumatic memory carries determinate significance of the past event due to reflecting the values of the speaker who accords meaning in the act of recollection” (Nasrullah Mambrol, “Trauma Studies”).

Narrative and recovery

For healing to ensue, there must be social uptake of narration.

- Narration “aims to ***break the silence*** that has overtaken survivors and that, in a way, has rendered them symptomatic.”
- “[T]he...act of ***bearing witness*** provides a social context that allows the story to cohere both because of the emotional meaning of receiving another's empathic attention and because it invokes the tacit dimension of shared (or public) history.” (Henry Greenspan, “Lives as Texts”)
- Testimony depends upon having a ***witness*** who listens, views, or reads the testimony, processes it, and engages the narrator in processing the traumatic event.
- The witness can acknowledge the narrator’s trauma and help to ***reintegrate or realign*** the them with cultural norms and values.

Narrative and recovery

“Love gives a person absolute power over another human being. I merely took full advantage of that.”

Recovery is social and dependent on language.

Tereza’s interpretation of her situation occurs in linguistic and social isolation, with only her understanding of her ontology and culture as resources.

- The often-noted inadequacy of language is compounded by Tereza and José’s not sharing a common language with which to communicate.
- They use their bodies and food to communicate.
- She interprets her and José’s histories and behavior as supporting her desires.
- Tereza lacks the “stock of knowledge” that could correct/counteract her interpretation and actions.

The reader is witness to Tereza’s memories yet cannot enter the story to help her process them.

Has she healed? What do the murder and cannibalism tell us?

How *not* to transcend trauma

“Why? Why did I do it?...
I only know that I could
not have done otherwise.
I did not want to lose
him. José belonged to me
alone, and I simply
wanted it to stay that
way, to possess him
totally forever.”

- Trauma, memory, recall, and recovery are all social.
 - Trauma undermines the victim’s understanding of self, standards, and relationships.
 - Memories can be repressed, but they recur and intrude.
 - Victims need to narrate their stories to witnesses.
 - Witnesses help to validate abuse and trauma and realign the victim with the social order.
- Isolation of the victim, suppression of memory, denial or lack of witness and validation, and failure to realign the victim with the social order hinder/prevent recovery.
- Victims of abuse who do not recover can become perpetrators (especially if they have lost a parent).

Why view trauma literature through a cultural lens?

“In all forms of art,
part of you is in the
trauma, and part of
you is a step away
from it.”

Maya Angelou

- Examining Tereza’s narrative through a cultural lens *gets at the “why” of her cannibalism.*
- Examining Tereza’s conduct through a cultural lens *enables readers to comprehend her behavior as both culturally grounded and meaningful*, given her understanding of her experiences, context, and cultural identity.
- Understanding Tereza’s behavior as grounded in Western, mainstream culture allows readers *to see her not as exotic or monstrous*, but as one of us (or not).
- Recognizing her shared membership in cultural groups affords *empathy rather than outright rejection.*
- Recognizing her as potentially one of us *enables us to learn* from her experience.
- This view *recognizes the uniqueness of responses to trauma*, given a variety of cultural norms, values and ideologies.

Questions?

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Autoethnography: The "why" of Tereza

- Seeks to **describe and systematically analyze personal experience** in order to understand **cultural experience**.
- Uses the practices of **autobiography** and **ethnography**.
- Recognizes that **stories are complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena** that teach morals and ethics, introduce unique ways of thinking and feeling, and **help people make sense of themselves and others**.
- Focuses on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research **grounded in subjective, personal experience** that **sensitize** readers to **issues of identity, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation** that deepen our capacity to **empathize with people who are different from us**."

Autoethnography: The "why" of Tereza

Autoethnography focuses on **epiphanies or critical events** that stem from, or are made possible by, **being part of a culture** and/or by **possessing a particular cultural identity**.

“What do people think of when they talk about their lives?...My life crumbles into a series of pictures, unconnected scenes which come to mind only occasionally and at random. **But there are key events**, the acts of chance or fate, which later enable me to construct a logical whole of my life. **One such moment was meeting José. The other was my decision to see our love through to the very end**” (105).

Because Tereza is a humanities scholar, her epiphanies involve both critical events and critical texts.

Linguistic and social isolation

- The often-noted **inadequacy of language** is compounded by Tereza and José's not having a common language.
- They use their **bodies and food** to communicate.
- Tereza's interpretation of her situation occurs in **linguistic and social isolation**, with only her understanding of her ontology and culture as resources.
- Tereza **interprets José's behavior** in support of her desires.
- Tereza lacks the **"stock of knowledge"** that could correct/counteract her interpretation and actions.

"Fate did exist, but it was not outside us. Fate, my fate, lay in my character, in certain unchangeable traits of my personality. The same was true of José...In the final analysis, I was really just a kind of facilitator" (166).

Tereza's behavior is contextually logical.

- Recognizing Tereza's narrative as autoethnography gets at the **“why”** of her cannibalism.
- Examining Tereza's conduct through a cultural lens enables readers to comprehend her seemingly deviant behavior as both **culturally appropriate and meaningful**, given her **understanding of her experiences, context, and cultural identity**.
- Why is such an analysis helpful?
 - **Culture is rich, multifaceted, and multilayered**, with space for the interplay of context, sense making, and action for individuals and groups.
 - A cultural lens allows us to **better understand** individuals in terms of **their context, understandings, and choices**.
 - Our understanding of Tereza's situation arises **out of her story** rather than being **imposed from outside** her experience and context.
 - Looking through a complex cultural lens allows us to **honor people's uniqueness** and their **personal stories**.
 - A cultural lens exposes us to forms of representation that **deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us**.